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Museums' Options

By Marnie Phipps Clark

In 1897, Mark Twain wrote: "A round man cannot be expected to fit in a square hole right away. He must have time to modify his shape." With the impending deep cuts in the Government's support of cultural programs, time to adapt to starkly altered conditions is a necessity that may not be accorded American museums this year. The Government would do well to avoid precipitous action if it values the preservation of our cultural heritage.

There will be an immediate, sizable cut in Federal support for our museums even if President Reagan does not succeed in slashing the Federal cultural budget by the full \$165 million he has proposed. Recent studies offer little hope that the private sector will bridge this Federal funding gap. The Urban Institute, a research organization that studies the problems of cities, estimated in a recent report that although private giving to nonprofit organizations increased by 38 percent between 1975 and 1979, a further in-

crease of 144 percent would be necessary to offset the Administration's proposed budget cuts and to keep pace with inflation through 1984. To make matters worse, museums will struggle for existing private funds against social-welfare organizations that are targeted for large-scale Federal cuts as well.

Given the painful truth that external assistance may not be available simply because it is sorely needed, museums are forced to devise new strategies that increase their chances for survival. Museums enjoy a wide and growing popularity that, in the long term, could both augment their claims for public support and increase their ability to generate earned income. A National Center for Educational Statistics survey, released in part in 1980, reported more than 350 million visits to 4,609 American museums in 1979. This is the equivalent of 1.6 visits for every man, woman, and child, and represents a 17 percent increase over the 298 million visits recorded by the same museums in 1975.

However, nearly three-quarters of our museums have annual operating budgets of less than \$100,000, and only 4 percent have budgets in excess of \$1 million. This suggests that the majority of museums will have to institute short-term measures while honing their entrepreneurial instincts for the future. For most small museums, loss of Federal support will necessitate

eliminating worthwhile programs to reduce expenses.

Alternative strategies, some already tested by museums, are available to make maximum use of limited resources. For example: Sharing personnel, facilities, services, materials, and other resources could reduce costs while maintaining essential services. Joint marketing or merchandising arrangements could generate earned income for groups of smaller institutions. Bartering systems could facilitate the exchange of resources between large and small museums or between museums and other organizations. Voucher systems could collectively develop new audiences and demonstrate accountability on a grassroots level.

Museum managers, traditionally trained in scholarly disciplines in the arts, the sciences, or history, need new perspectives and new skills to respond effectively to a competitive environment. Expertise from the private sector can make a critical contribution. For example: The impact of advances in computers and telecommunications on museum operations, audiences, and earned income has been explored by only the largest institutions. Industry has developed synthetic packaging materials that could reduce costs and increase protection for traveling museum exhibitions. Midcareer training could help museum professionals apply such business methods as strategic planning, marketing, financial, and human-resources management to their institutions.

Given adequate time for development, the popularity and extraordinary collections of American museums offer promising opportunities for increasing their independence and long-term fiscal health.

The legislation that established the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities states that "it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent." Ultimately, museums are responsible for transferring to succeeding generations a material record of human culture and the natural world. It is this collective cultural memory that assists living audiences to understand and measure change.

A Federal presence in the funding of American cultural institutions is essential not only to affirm the importance of this mission but also to provide museums, particularly the majority of institutions that are small and local, with the support and time essential for them to prepare for their individual futures and preserve our shared past.

Marnie Phipps Clark is president of Museums Collaborative, a nonprofit organization that provides management training to museum professionals and that sponsors a voucher system to expand museum audiences.